

"India is less about places and more about the warm-hearted people I have met. I find Indians open-minded and very sympathetic to the needs of others"

Satoko Chatterjee

Green warrior

For 'eco-holic' Satoko Chatterjee, a Buddhist who grew up in Niigata, a beautiful city facing the Sea of Japan, her green links paved the way for an evergreen link in her life. Chatterjee, who first came to India in 1985 to study the ecological impact of dams bordering villages, met a kindred green soul, Ardhendu Chatterjee, who was involved in rural development projects. "I found a man who shared my ideals," she says. "That set the tempo for our relationship and my engagement with India." With their passion for ecological issues, the couple travelled to the interiors of not just West Bengal, but across the length and breadth of India. "I crisscrossed India with Ardhendu in three months flat, visiting farms and different NGOs to understand the work they were doing." Her work and Ardhendu kept her rooted to India.

Along with her children, Chatterjee has formed a home-based eco-group, Green Sprout, to create ecological awareness and train people to adapt green practices in day-to-day life

In 1987, she had a simple Hindu wedding with Ardhendu in the presence of their parents. With Ardhendu spearheading two NGOs that work for social justice for indigenous communities and marginal farmers, and sustainable agriculture and food security for the poor, the couple plunged headlong into work. With work taking them to Allahabad, Auroville and Cambodia, Satoko became Chatterjee's professional partner too, contributing to her husband's rural development activities even while raising their children Shantonu and Manosi.

In 1989 in Auroville, while her husband worked on creating green communities by encouraging local agricultural practices, bio fertilisers and harnessing rain water, Satoko became a hands-on compatriot, helping set up waste management plants, getting involved in organic farming and planting trees. She even encouraged rural women to start their own home gardens for growing vegetables and medicinal herbs. Seeing their work in Auroville, in 1993 a Japan-based NGO sought their help in training young field workers in Cambodia in sustainable agriculture methods.

In 1997 on their return to India, the couple settled down in Chandannagar in West Bengal, as they wanted to live in a pollution-free environment. Since then, the 54 year-old has been actively involved in an environmental education project, ENRE (Ecology and Natural Resources Education), for training children in green methods. She drafts lesson plans on natural resources to educate children about the vegetation, medicinal plants and other ecological aspects of West Bengal, and holds regular sessions to sensitise local teachers to environmental issues. "It's appalling that most schools don't keep children abreast of ecological practices or give them practical training on maintaining a healthy relationship with our environment," she says. "I wanted to do my bit in creating a better tomorrow."



Shilbhadra Datta

Along with her children, Chatterjee has also formed a home-based eco-group, Green Sprout, to create ecological awareness and train people to adapt green practices in day-to-day life. Galvanised by her, the women in most households of Chandannagar observe the four Rs: reduce, reuse, recycle and rot (making one's own compost by rotting kitchen waste). "Word is catching on," she says with pride. She also organises '4R mela' in Kolkata with local NGOs and groups of friends.

Surprisingly, Chatterjee, who wears Indian clothes and has mastered Bengali cuisine, has been to some of the remotest villages of India but is yet to see the Taj Mahal! For her, India is less about places and more about "the warm-hearted

people" she has met. "I find Indians open-minded and very sympathetic to the needs of others," she says.

Chatterjee still manages to visit her parents in Japan at least once every two years. "Initially, my parents didn't approve of my decision to come to India and get married to an Indian but they came around after some time and have been frequently visiting me here in India," she shares. "My work in India is one way of expressing my thanks to them for allowing me to pursue my own path." So who does she root for while watching hockey matches between India and Japan on television? There's no hesitation here. "Of course it is India, my home!"

—Partha Mukherjee